

# EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

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## “My ACHS Conference”: A Review of the Second Biannual Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies, Canberra, 2-4 December 2014

In early December 2014 the Centre of Heritage and Museum Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra hosted the second biannual conference of the international Association of Critical Heritage Studies. Building on the organization's inaugural conference held in Gothenburg in 2012, scholars gathered from around the world to perform and discuss heritage research and practices across the fields of museum studies, public history and memory studies. This time they brought an especially intensive focus to heritage in Asia, intangible cultural heritage, and issues of multiculturalism. In addition, a number of themes of both contemporary and historical relevance also shaped the program, including: human rights; affect and emotion; conflict and destruction; urbanism; heritage studies theory; tourism; and pedagogy. Engagement with these themes drew

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over three hundred scholars eager to further – and in some instances to question – the Association’s mission to engage critically with heritage as traditionally conceived and to promote new ways of thinking about, and practising, heritage.

While the conference themes helped draw a wide range of participants to Canberra, they also shaped the ways attendees could experience the program. With some themes scheduled to include numerous panels across an entire day or even multiple days, attendees were faced with the choice of focusing intensely on particular themes, or to explore a range of particular panels and presentations that would cut across several themes. In this way, the strong thematic approach made the conference experience especially “customizable” for participants. For example, choosing a thematic approach reflecting my particular research interests, rather than one that was cross-cutting, “my ACHS conference” focused intensively on “heritage diplomacy”, “redressing colonial wrongs”, and “heritage in conflict zones”.

With the focus on “heritage diplomacy” on the first day, I connected with new research and thought being advanced on the work of global heritage networks in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe; instances of corporate cultural diplomacy in contemporary Russia; what is meant by “mutual” in the post-colonial cultural diplomacy between the Netherlands and Indonesia; and a call by Professor Tim Winter of Deakin University for more research in international relations and diplomacy studies on the entanglement of the material world and global interconnections. As a historian and scholar of heritage and memory, these presentations resonated with my interests in the history of heritage and the contemporary legacies of colonial relations.

On the second day, the double session I co-chaired with Dr. Andrzej Jakubowski on the topic of “redressing colonial wrongs” focused on debate over the restitution or return of cultural property from the colonial era. In particular, it explored the content and parameters of such debate as it has evolved within a global legal framework and emerging concerns for cultural rights, as well as how the vocabulary of the debate has changed through exemplary cases of restitution or return negotiated between metropolises and their former colonies. Presentations ranged from the critical historical analyses of cultural restitution between Belgium and Congo, Italy and Ethiopia, and the Netherlands and Indonesia, to reports of contemporary efforts to achieve restitution of land and law in the Caribbean, of repatriation of human remains in Southern Africa, and of the shifting conceptions of restitution from museums to aboriginal communities in the Australian experience since the 1970s. A final presentation highlighted the failures, or in some cases the limitations, of post-colonial restitution gestures to recognize or advance the legal or moral rights of formerly colonized peoples to their historically dispersed cultural heritage. Following our session, a complementary panel focused on the broader need for the re-theorization of heritage rights, responsibilities and ethics. Led by Professor Charlotte Woodhead of Warwick University, presenters discussed moral entitlement to cultural heritage; defining collective rights to cultural heritage from

an international legal perspective; rights-based struggles of heritage assemblages on “resource frontiers”; and a South Australian case study on the responsibilities of local government for heritage awareness and management.

On the third day, the theme of heritage in conflict zones included a two-part session focused on situations impacted by a range of conflicts. It included, for example, presentations on some of the ways urban resistance – such as protests, riots, urban social movements – produces new spaces, or “commons”, that are redefining heritage in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the potential of embracing an agonistic as opposed to a “shared” heritage that recognizes the continuation of feelings of hate, mistrust, and fear that persist after armed conflict subsides; and how the dispersed cultural objects of both Greek and Turkish Cypriots in the post-war ruins of Cyprus have created highly ambiguous spaces of “difficult” or “dissonant” heritage. Among others, a gripping presentation came from the Director of Antiquity and Museums of Aleppo, Youssef Kanjou, about the growing damage to the National Museum of Aleppo and strain on its staff that has grown during the military conflict in Syria since 2010. A later session also focusing on heritage in conflict included a presentation in which Diane Siebrandt of Deakin University reflected on her experiences of the relationship between troops in the United States and coalition militaries, Iraqi cultural heritage professionals and the ruins of ancient Babylon during the Iraq War. This was followed by a presentation by Benjamin Isakhan of Deakin University on the first results of a three-year project to study the escalation of ethno-sectarian violence and heritage destruction in Iraq between 2006 and 2007.

While my experience of the ACHS conference enabled me to focus intensively on issues of cultural diplomacy, restitution and rights, and heritage in conflict zones, “my ACHS conference” differed markedly from those who elected to follow other themes or mix things up across themes. Fortunately, there were ample breaks, and a conference dinner at the National Museum of Australia, during which I caught up with colleagues focusing on other themes. In meeting and sharing research with heritage scholars and practitioners from around the world, I was struck again, as I was in Gothenburg in 2012, by the breathtaking intelligence, creativity and diversity of participants, and the tremendous warmth and collegiality facilitated by the conveners of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies conference. The third biannual conference will be held in Montreal, 7-10 June 2016. I highly recommend that you make it “your ACHS conference”. For information on the next meeting see: <http://www.criticalheritagestudies.org>; <https://achs2016.uqam.ca/en>.